

[By Neal Goswami](#)

Vermont Rep. Peter Welch says U.S. troops in Afghanistan have refocused their mission on turning over security responsibilities to Afghan forces as quickly as possible.

The third-term Democrat spoke to reporters from London Friday following a trip to Afghanistan, Oman and Egypt as part of a six-person congressional delegation.

Welch said military leaders in Afghanistan during his last trip to the war-torn country in August 2010 were largely "focused on battle space and trying to make areas secure." But U.S. military strategy is now "premised on the expectation that we're leaving," Welch said.

"The discussion this time was all about transitioning the responsibility for security to the Afghan forces," he said. "The Afghans have to step in. It has been ten years and there is only so long that American taxpayers should be expected to bear that burden."

Military leaders have indicated a desire to draw down troops that were part of a "surge," ordered by President Barack Obama in December 2009, to gain control of several areas of the country, according to Welch.

"They totally support returning that surge strength of 33,000 by September of next year. So, that's a drawdown from the peak strength.," he said. "It's an open discussion what should happen after September."

Meanwhile, Welch said there is also bipartisan support in Congress, including on the congressional delegation he is traveling with, which included four Republicans and two Democrats, for winding down operations in Afghanistan and turning over control to Afghan forces.

Members of the delegation were concerned with a project to restore the Kajaki Dam on the Helmand River north of Kandahar, Welch said. The dam helps to provide electricity and irrigate farmland, but could cost the U.S. hundreds of millions of dollars.

"The project would repair a dam that actually was built many years ago with American assistance. It needs to be upgraded," Welch said. "The cost of \$475 million caused many in our delegation, Republicans and Democrats, to really gasp that the American people would be asked to pay that bill when we've got so many problems here at home."

Troops on the ground, including four Vermonters Welch met with this week, continue to perform admirably, he said. "That continues unabated from the first trip that I made until this trip. That's a constant," Welch said.

Welch has made four trips to Afghanistan since he was first elected in 2006.